

Broadband availability is the heart of our communications problems

In My Opinion

By: **THE CBN BOARD**

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The lack of cell phone service on the Northway is a serious matter, but it is part of a larger problem throughout Clinton, Essex and Franklin counties: the lack of adequate broadband telecommunications services for businesses and residents.

It's no secret that large areas of this region have no cell phone or broadband service. Why is that important? Why should our area have to settle for less service than urbanized areas, and is anyone doing something about it?

Let's face it. We are being left behind, and if we don't help ourselves — help each other — no one else will look after our essential communication needs. Do we really want to let the rest of the world to have an edge in this competitive environment? Our plight is the result of simple market-driven economics. In our free-enterprise system, companies spend where there is an adequate return on investment, where there is enough business to justify their costs. Because of our sparsely populated area, that leaves many people out.

The Community Broadband Network Project (CBN) has formed to improve our regional broadband infrastructure. Our community board comprises business people, educators, government officials, economic developers and health-care professionals representing our three counties. The CBN is developing plans for a new fiber optic and wireless service in the region, thanks to funds from Congressman McHugh and Sen. Clinton.

We have learned that many businesses, hospitals, schools and government offices cannot get sufficient broadband at affordable prices. Yet there has been a myth perpetuated that there is "fiber everywhere" in the region. There may be a lot of fiber optic cable around, but often it is full, or unavailable to residents and businesses, or is old and not capable of expanded service. Some of it provides only "long haul" traffic between Montreal and New York City. This is like the Northway with no exit ramps for our communities.

Today, nearly everyone wants digital communications. We want to send and receive, hear and be heard, see and be seen. Access to the Internet is important to our lives and our livelihood. In this area, many of us consider ourselves fortunate to get one Internet service, and a few of us can get two, cable and DSL. The impact of not having access to the highest quality telecommunications services is significant. Many of the limitations are related to lifestyle activities, such as not being able to receive high-definition television service or "on demand" movies. However, there are issues that are far more important to the future of our region.

Our colleges are restricted in the distance-learning services they can offer. Patient care is limited by lack of adequate telemedicine capability. Businesses that compete using the Internet are hindered by extremely slow transmission times that reduce their efficiency — and negatively impact profits. It will be virtually impossible to attract new business ventures that can provide the economic growth our region needs without the kind of digital communications services that are available in more populated areas. Our adult children will be even less likely to remain in this area to live and work because of the lack of quality jobs that pay good wages.

The CBN Board is developing a solution that is already a proven business model in our free-enterprise system. Our governments fund the construction of all types of infrastructure in the United States, including highways, dams and municipal services. The CBN would operate as a municipal airport does: Public funds create a modern facility that is open to all qualified service providers, who compete to provide service to the public.

To be clear: The CBN's objective is to build robust broadband conduits that private service providers can use to offer Internet/television/telephone services to end users; the CBN could also provide these services, if necessary. CBN's goal is to bridge the gaps so that our broadband service access is as good as anyone's,

anywhere.

Nationally and elsewhere in New York state, rural communities are building their own systems for residents and to retain and attract professionals who value a rural lifestyle. A publicly owned broadband project operates in Jefferson, Lewis, and St. Lawrence counties. Our Northern Vermont and Burlington neighbors are building networks. South Korea and Iceland have better telecom systems than we do. The CBN project is gathering momentum and seeks to ensure that our region stays competitive in the digital age.

Our parents and grandparents relied on rural electrical networks to bring them much-needed electricity. Today, broadband service is just as critical to us. It's time for Clinton, Essex and Franklin communities to come out of the digital darkness. We don't have to settle for less!

The CBN Board: Andy Abdallah, Bernie Bassett, Joel Benware, Teri Calabrese-Gray, Susan Day Fuller, Joe Gerardi, Scott Harwood, John Hebert, Jim Herman, Andrew Hersh-Tudor, Brad Jackson, Ewa Jankowska, Jim Jarrard, Jim Kucipeck, Adore Kurtz, Betsy Lowe, Howard Lowe, Terry Martino, Brian McBride, Jim McKenna, Noel Merrihew, Rosemary Miller, John Mills, Megan Murphy, Jody Olcott, Susanna Piller, John Prim, Trip Shannon, Sue Spissinger, Sandy Waters, Keith Wells Ross Whaley.